

Airpower on demand



Tech. Sgt. Ken Cox loads a C-130 Hercules (far left) at Balad Air Base, Iraq. The loadmaster is deployed to the 777th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron. Army personnel wait in line (above) for a flight to Forward Operations Base Salearno, Afghanistan. The C-130 and crew are from the Oklahoma Air National Guard deployed to the 774th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron at Bagram Air Base. An F-15E Strike Eagle soars over Afghanistan (center) in support of Operation Mountain Lion. The crew and fighter are deployed to the 336th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron in Southwest Asia.

Airmen's innovations making a difference on the battlefield

by Louis A. Arana-Barradas

photos by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung

For the most part, the daily routine in Iraq of C-130 Hercules loadmaster Tech. Sgt. Ken Cox is much the same. Once given a mission, he helps load cargo on his plane, flies it to where people need it and then helps unload it.

Then he does the same thing at the next stop. He does this until the mission ends or the crew stops to rest, hopefully back at their base. After being in Iraq for a while, the days blend into one. Ask



An Army air evacuation UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter (left) is met by Air Force and Army medics at the Air Force Theater Hospital at Balad. The hospital provides Level 1 trauma and specialized medical care throughout the Iraqi theater. Master Sgt. Bruce Leeahan (above) observes the mountainous terrain on the way to drop zones near Pakistan.

him how many hours he flew on his last mission and it's a good bet he won't know. But he's not griping about the grueling pace. He likes flying with the 777th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron out of Balad Air Base because he feels his job is vital and appreciated. And though he hates the family separation and weather, he finds his 12-plus hour days fulfilling.

Satisfaction comes from knowing when he and his crew are flying cargo, fewer troops are trucking stuff around Iraq and exposed to roadside bombs and other dangers.

"When we fly, fewer people get blown up or killed," the sergeant from Stuttgart, Ark., said.

Not all his missions are routine and one even lasted 48 hours. After flying three passengers to a desert base, his trusty Hercules transport broke when some communications gear failed. So the crew spent the night waiting for maintainers to fix it. The next day, the crew moved passengers to Mosul, Iraq, and then flew two Humvees from there to Kirkuk. Then they flew back to Balad with one passenger.

The 13-year "load" deployed from the 50th Airlift Squadron

at Little Rock Air Force Base, Ark., was glad to be "home," even though it seemed like light years away from his wife and children.

"After a long day like that, all I want is a hot shower and a good hot meal," he said.

A vigilant force

That's not asking much for such a demanding job. But Sergeant Cox and 20,000 fellow Airmen endure worse fighting in the war on terrorism. Spread out through the Horn of Africa, Iraq, Southwest Asia and Afghanistan, their job is to supply airpower on demand.

It's a tall order and a demanding job that keeps Airmen constantly rotating in and out of the region from their stateside bases. It's a routine that began at the start of the war on terrorism in Afghanistan after 9/11. Since then, the Air Force task in the coalition effort has been the same.

"Our role in both theaters [Iraq and Afghanistan] is to provide the full spectrum of air and space power to ground commanders," said Maj. Gen. Allen Peck, deputy Combined Force Air Component commander for U.S. Central Command.

Though the basic, strategic mission hasn't changed, some things Airmen do have changed in the past five years, General Peck said. Working from a Combined Air Operations Center at another desert base, he helps directs the air war that keeps Airmen in the region busy around the clock.

But that doesn't just apply to Airmen on the front lines. Airmen worldwide are in the fight, too — as they have been for the past 15 years. On any given day, 52 percent of the Air Force is working for combatant commanders, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley said. Doing the far-reaching mission — day in and day out — takes a vigilant total force dedicated and focused on winning the war on terror.

To help do the job, Airmen bring a host of capabilities "to the joint table" that allow them to capitalize on the speed, range and flexibility of airpower. They include command and control, strike and close air support, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, combat search and rescue and airlift and tanker support. And Airmen are doing nontraditional jobs to help their coalition partners, like providing convoy security and managing detainees.

"Whether they are flying combat missions, dropping relief supplies, providing convoy security or defusing an improvised explosive device, America's Airmen are making a difference every day," General Peck said.

At Balad, making a difference means moving cargo and troops from the base — an airlift hub where strategic transports like the C-17 Globemaster III drop off cargo arriving from the United States via Germany — to outlying bases by C-130 tactical airlift. Now some of those C-17s are also doing the short-hop, tactical deliveries, decreasing the number of C-130s needed for the job.

In 2005, theater-direct delivery flights, flown by C-17s and contracted Russian-made IL-76 aircraft, averaged about 500 sorties per month. So far this year they have flown double that number, General Peck said. These aircraft have been integrated with C-130s into a recently developed "hub and spoke" system in Iraq.

Sergeant Cox said this "hub-and-spoke" approach to airlift has been very effective — especially for his unit, which arrived in January.

"You really don't have to think much about what your next



Tech. Sgt. Richard Dorman performs a preflight walk-around inspection (above) at Bagram. An RC-135 Rivet Joint reconnaissance aircraft (right) moves into position behind a KC-135 Stratotanker for an aerial refueling over Southwest Asia. When connected to the refueling boom, the aircraft will receive more than 40,000 pounds of fuel allowing it to remain on station or move on to other stations to perform its mission.

mission will be,” he said. In the past year, C-130s flew nearly the same number of sorties — about 4,000 a month — but with 30 percent fewer aircraft. That’s thanks to the efficiency of the hub-and-spoke operation, the general said.

Flexibility brings evolution
Orchestrating all the aspects of the air war takes plenty of coordination. But General Peck is no stranger to air operations in the region. He was a key planner of the air war over Serbia and chief of combat plans at the combined air operations center in Italy during the subsequent air campaign there. And he worked at Central Command Air Forces’ forward headquarters during the major combat operations of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

So the general has seen the Air Force role evolve, even as the service deals with increasing deployments, troop and money cuts, restructuring and recapitalization of its aging inventory. “The past three-plus years have demonstrated the flexibility of airpower,” he said. That flexibility also allows innovative Airmen to provide ground troops more than just close air support. Airmen are now doing a host of other tasks needed in the war effort. For example, at Balad’s Air Force theater hospital, medics “perform miracles every day,” the general said. Wounded troops have a 96 percent chance of leaving Iraq alive because of the state-of-the art treatment they receive and the airlift that evacuates



them to U.S. military hospitals in Germany and elsewhere for more definitive care. And in Afghanistan, Airmen serve on provincial reconstruction teams and work with local leaders and elders to provide a more stable and secure environment. Airmen also fly humanitarian relief missions to support the coalition’s civil affairs efforts. But U.S. Airmen don’t work alone. They depend on their sister services for support. And they count on coalition partners to also play active and key roles in the war, General Peck said. These forces are just as focused on the overall mission and helping provide a persistent air presence over both regions. Together, they provide the world’s best air support to ground troops. And while dropping bombs on target is what most people associate with airpower, the services the Air Force provides continue to grow. “While the overall quantity of sorties has remained relatively constant, we have continued to evolve the qualitative capabilities airpower brings to the fight,” General Peck said. A good example of that has been the quantum leap in the use of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets to help troops on the ground. Using high-flying U-2 aircraft, MQ-1 Predator and Global Hawk, Airmen can provide commanders with near real time intelligence. Airmen can provide video from coalition aircraft targeting

pods, which “meets the ever-increasing demand for near-real-time, full-motion intelligence,” General Peck said. This led to the development of nontraditional intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, or NTISR, which has undergone considerable development and evolution in theater. That means each day, fighters like Air Force F-15E Strike Eagles and F-16 Fighting Falcons and Navy F/A-18E Hornets with advanced targeting pods provide “immediate sensor-to-shooter coverage for coalition forces convoys and forward operating bases,” he said. During an attack, fighters track insurgents with their targeting pods and relay information to a ground commander via a real-time downlink. So Airmen have adapted the aircraft to expand traditional coverage to meet the demand for surveillance and reconnaissance. “By using targeting pods on fighter aircraft to gather full-motion video, we are able to use airplanes — that might otherwise be boring holes in the sky — to provide the ground commander with imagery and situational awareness that protects ground troops and innocent civilians.” The capabilities these “eyes in the sky” provide give air war planners and aircrews a great advantage. The information they gather translates into immediate support to ground forces in harm’s way. “This capability is an incredible force multiplier in giving our ground forces complete confidence to identify hidden threats,

track those threats, monitor them and — ultimately — either successfully engage them or capture them,” he said. **Getting the job done**
Sergeant Cox doesn’t think much about the machinations of running the war. He’s in the trenches and his concerns are more immediate. He has to worry about what the cargo weighs, and rolling it onto the plane so it’s balanced. And he must make sure to strap it down safely so it doesn’t bounce around in flight. When his plane takes off, he plants himself at one of the plane’s side windows and keeps his eyes peeled for any sign of ground fire or rockets headed toward his plane. The only other thoughts in his mind are about whether he has to rig up some cargo at his next stop. Back home, only his wife really knows what he does. He purposely keeps the details of what he does, and the risks he takes each day, from his children and other family members. To make up for the long separation, he consoles himself by busting his tail to do the job right. Sergeant Cox is not unlike many of the Airmen who help provide airpower on demand. It’s a concept he and thousands more U.S. servicemembers have come to understand quite well. In the sergeant’s case, he gets to ply his airlift trade and move huge amounts of cargo and people “We’re doing what needs to be done — what we trained for,” he said. “That’s OK with me.” 🦅